

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 104

SO 032 986

AUTHOR Leung, Cynthia; Best, Gill
TITLE Asian Students and Humanities Subjects: Report to the Equity and Social Justice Branch, Victoria University.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 46p.; Project funded by the Equity and Social Justice Branch of Victoria University (Australia) through the Higher Education Equity Program.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Factor Analysis; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Humanities; Interviews; Qualitative Research; Questionnaires; Social Science Research; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Academic Support Services; *Asian Students; *Australia

ABSTRACT

Australia is a multicultural society and, in recent years, Asian immigration has increased tremendously. In terms of the educational participation of Asian-Australian students, students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are not highly represented in humanities, arts, and education courses. They prefer business, engineering, science, and mathematics. This project examined the experiences and perceptions of Asian-Australian students enrolled in humanities courses. The project comprises two studies: Study 1 is related to the reasons for choice of academic subjects, perception of humanities subjects, and perceived academic difficulties among Asian-Australian and Anglo-Australian humanities students; Study 2 is related to students' perceptions and uses of academic support services. In Study 1, participants included 170 students taking humanities subjects from a multi-campus university in Melbourne. There were 73 students from an Asian background and 56 Anglo-Australian students. A 3-part questionnaire was given to students during their humanities classes. Among the findings were that in choice of academic subjects, Asian-Australian students, more than Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, endorsed sex-role stereotypes, superiority of science subjects, and pay and career as reasons for choice of subjects. For Study 2, a qualitative approach was used to ascertain the perceptions of Footscray campus humanities students toward the Student Learning Unit (SLU), which provides help with language skills and learning support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five humanities students. Although only one of the five had used the SLU, their responses confirmed anecdotal evidence and SLU class evaluations concerning its usefulness and image. (Contains 5 tables and 16 references. Appended are questions and student responses.) (BT)

Asian Students and Humanities Subjects: Report to the Equity and Social Justice
Branch, Victoria University

Cynthia Leung

Department of Psychology

Victoria University

P O Box 14428

Melbourne City Mail Centre

Victoria

Australia 8001

Gill Best

Student Learning Unit

Victoria University

P O Box 14428

Melbourne City Mail Centre

Victoria

Australia 8001

This project was funded by the Equity and Social Justice Branch of Victoria University
through the Higher Education Equity Program

Cynthia Leung

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Australia is a multicultural society and in recent years, Asian immigration has increased tremendously. In 1994-1995, Asian countries such as Vietnam, Hong Kong, Philippines, India and China accounted for 23.9% of the immigrant intake (BIMPR, 1995). According to the 1991 census, Chinese-speaking persons are now the third largest non-English speaking group in Australia (Castles, 1993). According to the 1996 census (McLennan, 1998), in Australia, among people who speak a language other than English, 20% are Chinese-speaking, and 8.5% are Vietnamese-speaking. In terms of the educational participation of Asian-Australian students, students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, including Asian-Australian students such as Chinese-Australian or Vietnamese-Australians students are not highly represented in humanities, arts and education courses and they prefer business, science, mathematics and engineering courses (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994; Myhill, Herriman & Mulligan, 1994; Ainley, Robinson, Harvey-Beavis, Elsworth and Fleming, 1994). Some Asian students might experience language difficulties in relation to their academic studies in English-speaking countries. However, it is not known how they overcome their language problems and whether they use any support provided by academic institutions.

The aim of the present project is to examine the experiences and perceptions of Asian-Australian students doing humanities courses. Asian-Australian humanities students are, in a way, "non-typical", in the sense that their choice of academic courses is different from that of most Asians. An understanding of their perception of their courses, their experiences, their perceived difficulties, their strategies in coping with difficulties and their use of academic support provisions, could help educational institutions provide better

support for Asian -Australian humanities students to enable them to benefit more from the course. Specifically, this study aims to examine:

1. Asian-Australian humanities students' reasons for choice of subjects, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
2. Asian-Australian humanities students' perceptions of science and humanities subjects, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
3. Asian-Australian humanities students' perceived academic difficulties and solutions to the difficulties, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
4. Asian-Australian humanities students' perception and use of academic support services, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. In the academic institution where this study is carried out, academic support for students is provided by the Student Learning Unit (SLU).

This project comprises of two studies. The first study is related to the reasons for choice of academic subjects, perception of humanities subjects, and perceived academic difficulties among Asian-Australian and Anglo-Australian humanities students, and addresses the first three aims listed above. The second study is related to students' perception of academic support and is related to the fourth aim of this study.

Study 1

In order to understand the experiences and perceptions of Asian-Australian students in terms of academic participation, it is necessary to examine Asian conceptions of learning, education and intelligence as these concepts are relevant to academic pursuit. In terms of Asian conception of intelligence, Chan (1996) contends that according to ancient Chinese tradition, intelligence is related to brightness and quickness of the mind and that people can only know through learning. In a study of Chinese tertiary students, Chen and Chen (1988) found that Chinese students regarded non-verbal reasoning as most relevant to their conception of intelligence but regarded verbal reasoning as most difficult.

The Chinese emphasis on non-verbal reasoning and perceived difficulty in verbal reasoning is not inconsistent with findings on Chinese intelligence and achievement. Chan (1996) reported that Chinese were superior in their performance on The Raven's Progressive Matrices, a non-verbal reasoning test, to their counterparts in the west. However, Chinese were found to be weaker on word fluency tasks. Stevenson and Lee (1996) also reported that Asian students performed better than their American counterparts in mathematics and science. For example, Korean and Chinese students were the top performers in science achievement in the Second International Assessment of Educational Progress.

Within Asian cultures, such as Chinese or Japanese culture, education is highly valued and differences in intelligence do not inhibit educability (Lee, 1996). According to Lee (1996), in Chinese culture, education is perceived as having both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and is important for both personal improvement and societal development. Education is seen as an end in itself and education leads to the perfection of the self, or

becoming a sage. However, this pursuit for sagehood is also to be done through obtaining a government office. Education is regarded as a means for obtaining a government office. The extrinsic rewards such as fame and money associated with the government office are seen as another motivating factor for Chinese achievement. These ideas are still influential among Asian learners within a Confucian tradition, including Chinese and Japanese learners.

According to Chinese culture, education, or learning, is to be achieved through effort, driven by self-determination or will power (Lee, 1996). Consistent with the emphasis on effort, Asian students explain success in terms of effort and failure in terms of lack of effort whereas westerners tend to explain success and failure in terms of ability (Biggs, 1996). Asian students are also likely to spend more time on studying outside the classroom (Biggs, 1996).

In terms of learning strategies, Chinese students often adopt the strategy of deep memorising which involves combining memorisation with understanding and they often use rote memorisation as a means to aide understanding (Biggs, 1996). For students who are learning through a second language that they are not proficient in, they often employ survival strategies such as identifying a relevant section of the text and copying it or memorising sections of the text, the content of which they could understand (Johnson & Yau, 1996). Dion and Dion (1996) further maintains that proficiency in English is associated with greater life satisfaction among Chinese immigrant students in Canada.

To sum up, in Asian culture, non-verbal reasoning is regarded as most relevant to intelligence and Asian students tend to perform better on non-verbal reasoning tasks than tasks requiring verbal fluency. Education is seen as providing both intrinsic and extrinsic

rewards and is achieved through effort and the most common learning strategy is deep memorisation. However, the above assertions do not take into consideration sex difference. Among Asian societies, gender stereotypes are still maintained, and girls tend to have lower aspirations than boys (Cheung, 1996).

The Chinese emphasis and performance on non-verbal reasoning is again consistent with the educational or academic preference among Asian students, as discussed earlier, where they preferred science courses (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994; Myhill et al., 1994; Ainley et al. 1994). The preference for science subjects is also consistent with the perceived difficulty with verbal fluency among Asians and they are likely to choose science subjects because of the lesser demand on English skills (Chan, 1981, Myhill et al., 1994). In terms of motivation, science subjects are seen as subjects that could lead to extrinsic rewards such as career and money whereas people often choose to do humanities subjects because of intrinsic interest (Thomas, 1990). It is likely that for Asian-Australian students, choice of science subjects is consistent with the Asian conceptions of intelligence and education.

The aim of the present study is to examine the experiences and perception of Asian-Australian students doing humanities courses, in comparison to Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Asian-Australian humanities students are, in a way, "non-typical", in the sense that their choice of academic courses is different from that of most Asians. An understanding of their perception of their courses, their experiences, their perceived difficulties, and their strategies in coping with difficulties could help educational institutions provide better support for Asian -Australian humanities students to enable them to benefit more from the course, and perhaps, to encourage other

Asian-Australian students to take up humanities subjects. Specifically, this study aims to examine:

1. Asian-Australian humanities students' reasons for choice of subjects, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
2. Asian-Australian humanities students' perceptions of science and humanities subjects, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
3. Asian-Australian humanities students' perceived academic difficulties and solutions to the difficulties, compared with Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Method

Participants

Participants included 170 students taking humanities subjects from a multi-campus university in Melbourne. The majority ($n = 145$) were Faculty of Arts students whereas the others took humanities subjects as their electives. There were 73 students from an Asian background. Of these 73 students, 44 were permanent residents or citizens of Australia and 29 were international students. The majority of these students and their parents were born overseas in Asian countries, mainly from Vietnam ($n = 22$), Malaysia ($n = 13$), China and Hong Kong ($n = 12$). Among the three that were born in Australia, an Asian language was spoken at home. There were 56 Anglo-Australian students¹. These students and their parents were born in Australia or other English-speaking countries and English was the only

¹ One Anglo-Australian student did not give information on gender.

language spoken at home. There were 41 students from other non-English-speaking backgrounds (other NESB). The majority ($n = 35$) were born in Australia but at least one of their parents were born overseas in non-English speaking countries, mainly from Europe. The mean age of the participants was 23.10 years old ($sd = 5.81$) and the mean length of residence in Australia was 15.03 years ($sd = 9.47$). The distribution of participants by sex and faculty and ethnic background is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of participants by sex, faculty and ethnic background.

	Asian-Australians	Anglo-Australians	Other NESB
Arts - male	16	22	16
female	35	32	23
Business - male	6	0	1
female	11	0	0
Nursing - male	2	0	0
female	1	0	0
Education - male	0	0	1
female	1	1	0
Mean length of residence in Australia	7.21 (6.88)	22.28 (5.89)	18.70 (6.94)
Mean age	23.46 (4.75)	22.78 (5.51)	22.93 (7.69)

Materials

The materials consisted of a questionnaire which was divided into three parts.

Part one consisted of 36 statements on reasons for choice of academic courses and perception of academic courses. This questionnaire was developed out of focus group interviews with Asian students. Participants rated their degrees of agreement with the statements on a 5 point scale (5 = agree, 1 = disagree). The reliability estimate (Cronbach Alpha) was .76. Three items with item-total correlation less than .1 were subsequently excluded and 33 items were retained for analysis. The Cronbach Alpha of the 33 item scale was .78.

Part two consisted of questions on demographic information such as country of birth, language spoken at home, length of residence in Australia, gender and age etc.

Part C consisted of two open-ended questions on difficulties encountered in the participants' studies and their solutions to these difficulties.

Procedures

The participants were given the questionnaires during their humanities classes and they completed the questionnaires in class.

Results

A factor analysis (principal components with varimax rotation) was performed on the 33 items of the questionnaire and 10 factors resulted, accounting for 63.0% of the variance. Factor 1 (sex-role stereotypes) consisted of 4 items on types of jobs and academic subjects considered suitable for boys or girls, and accounted for 15.3% of the variance. Factor 2 (balanced view of subjects) consisted of 4 items, 2 of which endorsed the idea that science subjects would lead to jobs with good pay and career prospects and the other 2 endorsed the idea that humanities subjects would lead to jobs with good pay and career prospects, and accounted for 10.9% of the variance. Factor 3 (Humanities subjects)

consisted of 4 items endorsing the idea that humanities subjects involved language and writing essays, as well as abstract and creative thinking, and accounted for 6.1% of the variance. Factor 4 (pay and career) consisted of 5 items endorsing the idea that future pay and career prospects were important factors in the choice of academic subjects, and accounted for 5.8% of the variance. Factor 5 (Science superiority) consisted of 3 items endorsing the superiority of science, and accounted for 5.1% of the variance. Factor 6 (Science) consisted of 3 items on what was involved in science subjects and what was involved in humanities subjects and accounted for 4.4% of the variance. Factor 7 (Science thinking) consisted of 2 items endorsing the ideas that science subjects required abstract critical thinking and creative thinking and accounted for 4.3% of the variance. Factor 8 (People) consisted of 2 items endorsing the ideas that one would like to be in a job where one could help people and it was all right to work for other people, and accounted for 4.2% of the variance. Factor 9 (Thinking skills) consisted of 4 items, 2 of which were on one's thinking and mathematics skills and 2 of which on what thinking skills or concepts were involved in science subjects, and accounted for 3.6% of the variance. Factor 10 (English skills and interest) consisted of 2 items on one's evaluation of one's own English skills and endorsement of interest as being an important factor in the choice of subjects, and accounted for 3.2% of the variance. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Factor analysis results

Jobs that require patience, carefulness and interpersonal skills are more suitable for girls.	.78	.12	-.01	.02	.13	.11	.07	.22	.01	-.25
Science jobs are for boys and humanities jobs are for girls.	.77	.06	-.15	.12	.27	-.01	.11	-.05	.01	-.04
Jobs that require physical manual labour work are more suitable for boys.	.73	.06	.02	-.01	-.01	.23	.10	.01	.09	.05
Girls who do science subjects are not feminine.	.67	.23	-.08	.01	.16	-.24	-.01	-.24	-.08	-.01
Humanities subjects will lead to jobs with good pay.	.21	.76	.14	.31	-.03	-.07	.16	.01	-.01	.04
Science subjects will lead to a clear future career.	.06	.73	.13	-.04	.28	.27	.16	.05	.05	-.06
Science subjects will lead to jobs with good pay.	.03	.70	.12	-.03	.15	.35	.04	.09	.06	-.04
Humanities subjects will lead to a clear future career.	.20	.68	.11	.33	.08	-.23	.21	-.07	.12	.02
Humanities subjects require abstract critical thinking.	-.04	.04	.81	.03	-.01	.07	.18	.06	.18	-.05
Humanities subjects require creative thinking.	-.18	.15	.72	.07	-.05	.01	.09	.11	-.04	.01
Humanities subjects involve writing essays.	.02	.17	.57	-.18	.03	.24	-.21	.15	-.13	.35

Humanities subjects include language subjects.	.09	.36	.50	-.01	-.05	.28	-.29	-.02	-.01	.05
In choosing a subject, I feel that the pay the associated future career brings is most important.	.02	.24	.06	.72	.29	-.01	-.04	.03	-.08	.06
In choosing a subject, I feel that the associated future career is most important.	-.10	.12	.09	.72	.04	.05	-.17	.27	.11	-.10
In choosing my career, my family and/or teachers have had an influence on me.	.26	-.06	-.13	.50	-.01	.04	.25	.10	.10	-.13
In choosing a job I think the status of the job is most important.	.29	.03	-.22	.45	.22	.14	.06	-.14	-.26	.31
Humanities subjects require logical thinking.	.01	.17	.32	.40	-.16	.03	.32	-.29	.05	.23
One of the best things about the western world is that it is scientific.	.22	.19	.08	.11	.67	.02	.04	-.13	-.06	-.11
Any person can do humanities subjects.	.16	-.01	.01	.09	.66	.02	.04	-.13	-.06	-.11
Science subjects are better than humanities subjects.	.07	.17	-.29	.09	.63	.05	.01	.16	.16	-.16
Science subjects include mathematics, physics and chemistry.	.05	.11	-.04	.01	-.10	.71	-.07	-.21	.17	.13
Psychology/social work courses are humanities courses.	.23	.05	.22	.09	-.01	.55	.02	.06	-.14	-.03
To study science subjects, one has to really study hard.	-.13	.05	.12	.01	.35	.51	.22	.26	-.11	.09

Science subjects require abstract critical thinking.	-.06	.36	.01	-.06	.11	-.06	.70	-.10	.04	-.09
Science subjects require creative thinking.	.12	.08	.08	.03	.21	.07	.70	.04	-.01	.17
I would like to be in a job where I could help people.	.06	-.07	.41	.03	-.04	-.15	.01	.69	-.03	.01
In my future career it is alright to work for someone else.	-.07	.15	.01	.24	.08	.09	-.05	.67	-.04	.19
Psychology/social work courses are science courses.	.05	.11	.03	.14	.05	-.10	-.03	-.14	.74	.05
I think I am good at mathematics.	.17	.03	-.20	-.23	-.07	.07	.17	.32	.51	.09
I am not used to abstract critical thinking. ²	.26	.35	-.24	.06	-.19	-.14	.25	.18	-.46	-.07
Science subjects require logical thinking.	-.13	.19	.25	.07	-.04	.29	.36	.09	.45	-.16
In choosing a subject, I feel that interest is most important.	-.07	-.16	.07	.15	-.16	.30	.10	.25	-.03	.65
My English is good enough to write essays.	-.36	.08	.04	-.28	-.06	-.14	.03	.04	.30	.63

² Reversed scored.

The scores of the items loading highly on each factor were summed up and ten new variables were formed. These ten new variables were then subjected to another factor analysis (principal components with varimax rotation) and three factors resulted, accounting for 51.9% of variance. The first factor consisted of 5 variables which were related to reasons for choice of subjects, namely, sex-role stereotypes (.71), science superiority (.69), balanced view of subjects (.58), pay and career (.55) and English (-.55) and accounted for 23.5% of variance. The second factor consisted of 3 variables on perception of subjects and jobs, humanities subjects (.77), people (.68) and science (.52) and accounted for 17.6% of variance. Factor 3 consisted of 2 variables on reasoning skills, thinking skills (.76) and science thinking (.58) and accounted for 10.9% of variance. The mean scores of the participants are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Mean scores of participants

	Asian- Australians (<u>n</u> = 73)	Anglo- Australians (<u>n</u> = 56)	Others (<u>n</u> = 41)	All participants (<u>n</u> = 170)
Sex-role stereotypes	9.87 (3.71)	6.03 (2.15)	7.93 (3.96)	8.14 (3.72)
Balanced view of subjects	12.53 (3.14)	11.23 (2.58)	11.07 (3.39)	11.75 (3.09)
Humanities subjects	16.31 (2.73)	16.05 (3.09)	16.19 (3.04)	16.20 (2.91)
Pay and career	17.62 (3.13)	15.67 (3.12)	15.22 (3.63)	16.40 (3.41)
Science superiority	9.37 (2.72)	7.57 (2.41)	6.80 (2.43)	8.16 (2.76)
Science	11.86 (2.18)	11.27 (2.09)	11.05 (2.65)	11.47 (2.29)
Science thinking	7.22 (1.76)	6.11 (1.98)	6.02 (1.98)	6.56 (1.96)
People	7.78 (1.68)	7.68 (1.79)	7.41 (1.61)	7.66 (1.70)
Thinking skills	12.86 (2.34)	13.89 (2.69)	13.09 (3.02)	13.25 (2.66)
English skills and interest	7.68 (1.71)	8.88 (1.10)	8.51 (1.36)	8.28 (1.53)

To examine ethnic and sex differences in the above issues, three multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were performed. The independent variables for all three MANOVAs were ethnic group with three levels (Anglo-Australians, Asian-Australians and others) and sex with two levels. The dependent variables for the first MANOVA were sex-role stereotypes, science superiority, balanced view of subjects, pay and career and English. The results indicated that there was a significant ethnic difference, $F(10, 320) = 6.76, p < .001$. Univariate F tests indicated that the three ethnic groups differed in terms of sex-role

stereotypes ($p < .001$), science superiority ($p < .001$), pay and career ($p < .001$), and English ($p < .001$). There was also a significant interaction effect, $F(10, 320) = 2.61, p = .005$.

Univariate F test indicated that there was a significant interaction effect for sex-role stereotypes ($p < .001$). Asian-Australian females endorsed sex-role stereotypes most (mean = 10.45, $sd = 3.65$), to be followed by males from the others group (mean = 10.00, $sd = 4.07$), and Anglo-Australian females endorsed sex-role stereotypes least (mean = 5.59, $sd = 1.63$). There was, however, no significant sex difference. A series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) with post hoc tests (Scheffe) were performed to map out ethnic differences. The results indicated that for sex-role stereotypes, all three groups differed from one another. Asian-Australians endorsed sex-role stereotypes most and Anglo-Australians endorsed these ideas least. For pay and career, science superiority, and English, the Asian-Australians differed significantly from the Anglo-Australians and the others. Asian-Australians endorsed pay and career and science superiority more than Anglo-Australians but were less confident of their English skills and endorsed interest as a reason for choice of subjects less than the Anglo-Australians.

The dependent variables for the second MANOVA were humanities subjects, people and science. The results indicated that there was a significant sex difference, $F(3, 161) = 4.38, p = .005$. Univariate F test indicated that there was a significant sex difference in terms of people. Females (mean = 8.04, $sd = 1.55$) endorsed people issues more than males (mean = 7.08, $sd = 1.76$). There was no significant ethnic difference nor interaction effect.

The dependent variables for the third MANOVA were thinking skills and science thinking. The results indicated that there was a significant ethnic difference $F(4, 326) =$

4.72, $p = .001$. Univariate F test indicated that the ethnic groups differed in terms of science thinking ($p = .001$). ANOVA with post hoc test (Scheffé) indicated that Asian-Australians endorsed the requirement of abstract and creative thinking in science more than Anglo-Australians and others. There was no significant sex difference nor interaction effect.

The answers to the two open-ended questions on perceived difficulties and solutions were coded by the first author and the research assistant. There were 13 categories for perceived difficulties and 6 categories for solutions. The inter-rater reliability (Kappa) was .84 for perceived difficulties and .67 for solutions. A series of Chi square tests were performed to examine ethnic differences. Due to the large number of comparisons and the problem of inflated alpha, an alpha level of .0025 was adopted. There were no significant differences for solutions to difficulties but for perceived difficulties, the ethnic groups differed in terms of English skills, $\chi^2(2) = 29.4$, $p < .001$ and workload $\chi^2(2) = 12.04$, $p < .0025$. More Asian-Australian students reported problems with English than Anglo-Australians or others. More Anglo-Australian and others students mentioned about workload (too much work) than Asian-Australian students. The frequencies are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Frequencies for perceived difficulties

	Asian- Australians	Anglo- Australians	Others	Total
English problems	19	1	2	22
Time management	1	9	2	12
Boredom	0	4	1	5
Lack of resources	4	9	2	15
Problems with learning Asian languages	0	3	2	5
Problems with essay writing	10	3	3	16
Teaching styles of lecturers	1	3	1	5
Co-ordinating study or other duties	0	2	0	2
Examinations	0	1	0	1
Problems with specific subjects	4	1	3	8
Motivation	0	4	4	8
Workload	1	8	10	19
Understanding work	5	3	1	9

Table 5

Frequencies for reported solutions to perceived difficulties

	Asian- Australians	Anglo- Australians	Others	Total
Work harder	19	10	11	40
Time management	1	7	3	11
Put up with it	9	5	5	19
Help from peers	5	3	5	13
Help from lecturers	5	2	0	7
Use resources in other universities	2	5	1	8

Discussion

In terms of reasons for choice of academic subjects, Asian-Australian students endorsed sex-role stereotypes, superiority of science subjects, and pay and career as reasons for choice of subjects more than Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English speaking background. With regard to perception of subjects, Asian-Australian students endorsed the idea that science involves abstract and creative thinking more than Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English speaking background. For perceived difficulties, Asian-Australian students were less confident of their English skills and reported more problems with English than Anglo-Australian students and other students from non-English speaking background. Though they were doing humanities courses, Asian-Australian students seemed to be least positive of the value of humanities subjects and were least confident of their English skills, which is important for success in

humanities subjects. On the other hand, Asian-Australian students endorsement of pay and career as reasons for choice of subjects and thinking skills in science and their lack of confidence in English are consistent with early discussions on Asian conceptions of education and intelligence. The lack of confidence in English skills among Asian-Australian students is also consistent with the qualitative results where Asian-Australian students reported more language difficulties than Anglo-Australian and other students. Asian-Australian students were more accepting of the workload required, compared to Anglo-Australian and other students.

In terms of the implications of the present study, to encourage Asian-Australian students to make the most out of their humanities courses, they should be helped to realise the value of their course, in terms of the thinking skills involved and the career prospects. Furthermore, they should be given more support, especially English language support, to enable them to deal with course demands. However, such support would have to be provided in a way that is culturally and practically appropriate for their needs. Support should also be publicised to students as a positive approach to enhance learning rather than as support for students with problems.

Study 2

For the second half of the study, a qualitative approach was used to ascertain the perceptions of Footscray campus Humanities students' towards the Student Learning Unit (SLU). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Humanities students at the Footscray Campus. Two of the students were in their 2nd year, two were 3rd year students and for one student the year level was unknown. The students' ages ranged between 19 and 28 and three were males and two were females. Two of the five students spoke a language other than English at home, two had been born outside Australia, two in Australia and one was unknown. Each student volunteered to be interviewed about their understandings and perceptions of the SLU and each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. A semi-structured interview format was used (see Appendix A for questions and summary tables of the responses) and the interviewer was independent of the SLU. To protect the students' anonymity each student has been named Student A, B, C, D and E.

Background

The Student Learning Unit (SLU) provides a variety of academic skills, language and learning, mathematics and science academic support classes in which students' academic and English language skills are developed within the context of the assignments and subjects they are studying (e.g first year Psychology, Business Law, Micro-economics, Performance Studies, Accounting). This type of academic support is recognised as the most useful and practical in meeting university students' academic and English language needs and is accepted as best practice in Australia. Underlying this academic support is a philosophy of developmental education whereby students participate *voluntarily* in an appropriate academic support program. Such programs can be as short-term as a once-off

one hour consultation or as long-term as an hourly class once a week for two semesters or longer. The general aim with any student (regardless of their course or year level) is for the student to be taught appropriate academic skills so that they can eventually work independently.

In the interviews, some students referred to appointments and/or generic English language classes. It must be noted that until 1999³ the availability of 1-1 student appointments and generic English language classes was much greater than is presently the case due to a change in the SLU's focus and resources issues. However, the issues raised by the students concerning 1-1 consultations and generic English language classes are important in highlighting some of the student academic support issues at Victoria University.

Use of the SLU

Only Student B had attended the SLU and that experience turned out to be very frustrating and disappointing for him because he was placed in a generic English language class which he considered to be set below his English language abilities:

"They put me in a class, actually everyone's level is totally different" "it's not gonna respond to my needs and I quit."

Generic English classes (meaning English language classes which are taught without a specific subject or assignment focus) have always been requested by some students but have never been a central or major function of the unit precisely because of the difficulties highlighted by this student of addressing the diverse English language and

³ The students were interviewed in 1998.

discipline specific needs of students. The student raises the pertinent question, currently being discussed in the context of the university's Personalised Access and Study Policy (PASP), of how best to meet the English language needs of students.

Areas of difficulty

All the students identified academic writing and academic skills as a problem area i.e. "writing" "presentations" "reading quickly" "approach to essays" "references" "understanding the topic" and all these are the main focus of SLU classes. However, despite this, only one student had approached the SLU staff for help and the rest sought help from friends, other students and teaching staff or librarians.

Student A was recommended to seek support from the SLU but she responded to her predicament in the following way:

"I'm an overseas student and I find very hard the English grammar and even sometimes with the writing and normally I try to do something about it, but I don't have the time."

The question of students 'needing time' is an important one when considering ways to support students with English language or academic skills needs. This is highlighted in the students' responses to the question, "what would make you go to the SLU? As student A commented,

"If I had more time, if I'm having a lot of difficulty with an essay, knowing the SLU's timetable."

For this student, accessing SLU support is an 'extra' for which she feels she can allow no time. 'Needing time' is an important and complex issue to consider when examining the best ways to support students' academic needs. On the one hand there

appears to be general consensus of the need for students to take charge of their own learning and to seek help if and when they need it. However, because there might be timetable clashes or the student might have very high contact hours (particularly in the case of nursing and science students), it can be very difficult for students to seek out help over and above the normal timetable demands. Even for those students who have low contact hours, their other demands such as part time work or family commitments often mean that they are unable or unwilling to seek out extra help. Although an individual appointment with an SLU lecturer might be the most useful or appropriate form of support, appointments are no longer available to the same extent as they once were. Providing more individual appointments might not necessarily be the best way to respond to students' needs as students still would be required to have a reasonable understanding of their own needs and to be able to think and plan in advance so that their needs can be met. These are skills that not every student has or is prepared to factor into their studies. Help 'on demand' can be students' preferred method of academic support. Furthermore, 'on demand' support is not usually possible to provide in the context of thousands of students, many campuses and limited resources and staff.

For the other students, knowing exactly what the SLU provides and whether or not it is considered to be useful would encourage them to use the SLU. Although such information is easily accessible (by visiting or telephoning an SLU lecturer in their office, visiting the SLU website, hearing about the SLU from a subject lecturer, or reading about it on the global email, reading about the SLU in the student diary) many students still choose other methods of academic support. For example, Student A already feels she needs lots of time to complete her assignments because English is not her first language.

It is therefore understandable that she prefers to seek the help of a friend or family member as they are more likely to be able to respond immediately to her English language needs, whereas an individual appointment with an SLU lecturer may not have been available as soon as she would have preferred.

Awareness of the SLU in terms of its location was low for the students interviewed. Despite it being seemingly easy to get in contact with the SLU only Student D had seen the publicity for the SLU and only one student remembered being spoken to by an SLU staff member (during orientation). Students C and D both noticed how there was not as much publicity as previous years and Student D expressed a need for the SLU to be advertised more. SLU staff have indeed reduced their publicity material in terms of posters and fliers as they have been unable to cope with existing student demand.

In terms of understanding the role of the SLU, three of the five students had heard of the SLU and one had used its services. There appeared to be a reasonable understanding of the SLU's between the five students with Students A, C and D having the most understanding citing a variety of purposes: *"students who have difficulties with English"*, *"For everyone but emphasis on targeted groups e.g students with ESL"* *"for people having trouble"*. Students B and E both thought, erroneously, that the SLU is only for students with a language other than English or for International students. All but one of the students cited English language difficulties as the main focus of the SLU's services. This is an understandable perception in a university where 40% of the student population is from a Non-English speaking background (NESB). However, although NESB students are high users of the SLU's classes the SLU is in fact for all students

regardless of English language background with the focus being on English language and/or academic skills development of any language background, year level or faculty.

Reasons for attending the SLU

As only one student had attended the SLU the students were asked to suggest what might encourage them to attend the SLU's classes. Their responses to this question were varied and revealing. Student A said she would use it if she had more time or if she was having difficulties with an essay, although time was more of an issue for her as she had been having difficulties but chose not to go to the SLU. Student B wanted to test it out to see if it would be useful *"If I got efficient specific help in a class or on my own"*. Student C would attend if a subject lecturer recommended him to go *"if I was told there was something to improve my academic progress and if a lecturer suggested it"*. Student D felt that he would go if *"I wasn't up to speed despite lots of effort"* and *"if it was more common for people to go."* Student E gave four specific reasons to explain why she would use the SLU *"If I knew more about it, if they had a good reputation"*, *"if I knew people who'd been there who think it's helpful"* and *"if they had personal tutors"*. Precisely what is meant by the last statement is unknown but prior to 1999 students could have made individual appointments to see an individual tutor. Perhaps this comment highlights the student's lack of knowledge of the SLU and how it operates. The variation of responses also highlights the need for subject lecturers and other staff to recognise the different motivations behind students choosing to attend an academic skills/English language support class. An underlying concern of the students' responses seems to be for use of the SLU to be seen as 'normal'. Peer pressure and the stigma of 'remediation' seem therefore to be major issues

for many students and creative ways need to be utilized if staff intend to encourage their students to seek help with their academic work..

Non-use of the SLU

Interestingly, the above issues were not raised directly by the students as a reason for not using the SLU although students C and D referred to personal unease citing "*feeling different*" and "*pride*" as reasons for not using the SLU. Other students focussed on more practical issues such as the need for timing of classes after 5pm, wanting to be in class with people of the same English language level and having a presence at the front desk when one has queries. Student E said that nothing would prevent her from using the SLU although her responses to the previous question for which she cites four different reasons suggest otherwise.

Only Student D knew of someone who had used the SLU. The experience was reported as a positive one "*He's quite excited about being steered in the right direction*". Student A said all her students had heard of it but that they were all too busy to go. This response suggests that usage of the SLU is not high in the Humanities at Footscray Park. This is probably due to the relatively small number of classes that have been run in the Humanities area at that campus, the focus instead being on individual support until 1999. If a key issue for students in deciding whether or not to access the SLU's academic support classes is not wanting to look different from other students, then this is worthy of greater understanding and scrutiny. Ensuring that academic support classes are voluntary seems not to be enough in decreasing feelings of difference.

Usefulness of the SLU

Despite the low usage of the SLU by those interviewed for this project, all students except student C said that they thought it would be useful and student D thought it was "*important to have*". Student E felt it would be "*very good if it helps people*" and Student B felt that "*it could be quite useful*". Student A specified that "*I think it would be quite helpful for my English and for my work, help me master the language more*".

Conclusions

Although only one of these five students had used the SLU, their responses confirm anecdotal evidence and SLU class evaluations concerning the SLU's usefulness and image. All the students felt that such a unit is necessary on the grounds of equity and yet all the students pointed out the difficulties of accessing support or of not being sure how to make best use of it. Whether or not Humanities students' understandings and usage will increase at the Footscray Park Campus with the shift to providing the majority of academic support in classes is yet to be seen.

Student	Age	Sex	Year level	Country of birth	Language spoken at home	Length of time in Australia
A	25	Female	2 nd	China (grew up Hong Kong)	Cantonese	Four years
B		Male				
C	23	Male	3 rd	Malaysia	English	20 years
D	28	Male	3 rd	Australia	English	All life
E	19	Female	2 nd	Australia	English	All life

Conclusions and recommendations

The present study highlights some of the issues faced by Asian humanities students. Their choice of subjects is influenced by career prospects and sex role stereotypes. They seem to place a higher value on science subjects than humanities subjects, and are not confident of their language skills, reporting difficulties with their English language.

Within Victoria University, academic support such as language support is available to all students but as revealed from the interview data, there are lots of perceived and actual constraints and barriers concerning type and availability and appropriateness of support, as well as misunderstandings about when, what and how support is offered. The issues are not specific to Asian students. There is also a mismatch between the perceptions of SLU and students. For example, students seem to be separating English language from the actual demands of the academic task whereas as a general rule, the best practice is to pool the two together. There is also a perception that academic support is for students who do least well.

With regard to the actual constraints and barriers, there are some administrative issues concerning the way in which support provision in Footscray campus could have compounded the problem and the issues are somewhat specific to Footscray campus in 1998.

Recommendations

In order to encourage and support Asian students in their participation in humanities subjects, the following are recommended:

1. The career prospects of humanities subjects should be explained to students, probably at the high school level, to develop a positive perception in terms of the career prospects of humanities degree courses.

2. The skills taught in humanities subjects which are useful for employment, such as communication and writing skills, critical thinking skills and the like should again be emphasised to high school students and tertiary students so they are aware of the value of the skills taught in humanities courses.
3. Appropriate academic support services should be developed to meet the language needs of Asian humanities students. Teaching staff would also need to be made aware of the language needs of Asian humanities students so that support could be provided at various levels.

In order to encourage the development of an academic culture in which students feel comfortable accessing academic and English language support, the following are recommended.

1. Invite students who have experienced SLU classes to explain to other students what they are about and how they might find them useful.
2. Ensure two way communication between subject lecturers and SLU staff concerning the roles and purposes of the different SLU classes and programs. This could happen within a professional development context as well as on a day to day basis.
3. Provide targeted 1:1 academic support for undergraduate students so that they can develop their English language and skills in tandem and in order that the students' individual academic and English language needs can be met.

References

- Ainley, J., Robinson, L., Harvey-Beavis, A., Elsworth, G. & Fleming, M. (1994). Subject choice in years 11 and 12. Canberra: AGPS.
- Biggs, J. (1996). Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture. In D.A. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds.) The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences. Hong Kong: Comparative Educational Research Center and The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.
- Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (1995). Immigration update, June Quarter. Canberra: AGPS.
- Castles, I. (1993). Census characteristics of Australia: 1991 census of population and housing. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Chan, J. (1996). Chinese intelligence. In M.H. Bond (Ed.) The handbook of Chinese psychology. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Chan, K.N. (1981). Education for Chinese and Indochinese. Theory Into Practice, 20, 35-44.
- Chen, M.J. & Chen, H.C. (1988). Concepts of intelligence: a comparison of Chinese graduates from Chinese and English schools in Hong Kong. International Journal of Psychology, 23, 471-487.
- Cheung, F.M. (1996). Gender role development. In S. Lau (Ed.) Growing up the Chinese way: Chinese child and adolescent development. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Department of Employment, Education and Training (1994). Selected higher education statistics: 1993. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dion, K.L. & Dion, K.K. (1996). Chinese adaptation to foreign cultures. In M.H. Bond (Ed.) The handbook of Chinese psychology. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, R.K. & Yau, A.S.N. (1996). Coping with second language texts: the development of lexically-based reading strategies. In D.A. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds.) The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences. Hong Kong: Comparative Educational Research Center and The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.

Lee, W.O. (1996). The cultural context for Chinese learners: conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition. In D.A. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds.) The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences. Hong Kong: Comparative Educational Research Center and The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.

McLennan, W. (1998). 1998 Year book Australia. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Myhill, M., Herriman, M. & Mulligan, D. (1994). Subject and career choice of NESB youth. Canberra: Bureau of Immigration and Population Research.

Stevenson, H.W. & Lee, S.Y. (1996). The academic achievement of Chinese students. In M.H. Bond (Ed.) The handbook of Chinese psychology. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, K. (1990). Gender and subject in higher education. Suffolk: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Appendix A

List of questions

1. What do you do when you are having difficulty with your school work?
2. What are the problem areas. What sorts of difficulties?
3. Have you ever asked anyone for help? Who?
4. Have you heard about the SLU?
5. What do you know about the SLU?
6. Who is the SLU for? What kind of students go to SLU?
7. Have you used their service? What are the reasons for using their service?
8. Do you know of any friends who have used the SLU? What did they say about it?
9. Have you seen the publicity involving the SLU. What do you think about it?
10. What would make you go to the SLU?
11. What would stop you from going to the SLU?
12. How useful is the SLU?
13. How often have you been to the SLU?
14. Do you remember anyone from the SLU ever coming to lectures or tutorials or orientation?

Appendix B

Responses to questions

TABLE A What do you do when you are having difficulty with your school work?

Student A	Give to someone else to look at
Student B	Someone else, tried SLU
Student C	Goes to lecturer or tutor
Student D	Self, lecturer, student, librarian
Student E	Self, tutor, lecturer, friends

TABLE B What are the problem areas. What sorts of difficulties?

Student A	English grammar, writing, presentations, reading quickly, understanding other people's questions, speaking English
Student B	
Student C	Grammar
Student D	Approach to essays, knowing what they want, references
Student E	Workload, understanding the topic, being pushed for time

TABLE C Have you ever asked anyone for help? Who?

Student A	Student next to me, someone who's been here for more than ten years
Student B	
Student C	Lecturer
Student D	Other students, librarian
Student E	Lecturer, tutor

TABLE D Have you heard about the SLU?

Student A	Yes. A teacher suggested I go there
Student B	Yes and have used their services
Student C	Yes
Student D	No
Student D	No

TABLE E What do you know about the SLU?

Student A	A program for all students who have difficulty with English or writing assignments. It's free. Have to have extra time for it.
Student B	For students from NESB who need help
Student C	Very little. Help people overcome learning problems e.g. grammar. I think they provide courses to help improve your academic performance.
Student D	For people who are having a bit of trouble
Student E	More for international students, reading drafts.

TABLE F Who is the SLU for? What kind of students go to SLU?

Student A	Students who have difficulties with English
Student B	For students who need help from a NESB
Student C	For everyone but emphasis on targeted groups e.g students with ESL
Student D	For people having trouble
Student E	International Students

TABLE G Have you used their service? What are the reasons for using their service?

Student A	No
Student B	Yes
Student C	No because of a lack of time and I don't know where to go
Student D	No
Student E	No

TABLE H Do you know of any friends who have used the SLU? What did they say about it?

Student A	No but they've all heard about it. Noone has time to go.
Student B	No
Student C	No
Student D	Yes, one. He's quite excited about being steered in the right direction.
Student E	No

TABLE I Have you seen the publicity involving the SLU. What do you think about it?

Student A	No
Student B	No
Student C	No but I might have. There's not a lot of it and it doesn't get your attention
Student D	Yes but not a lot this year
Student E	No and it should be advertised more.

TABLE J What would make you go to the SLU?

Student A	If I had more time, if I'm having a lot of difficulty with an essay, knowing the SLU's timetable.
Student B	If I got efficient specific help in a class or on my own
Student C	If I was told there was something that could improve my academic progress and if a lecturer suggested it
Student D	If I wasn't up to speed despite lots of effort, if it was more common for people to go
Student E	If I knew more about it and if they had a good reputation and if I knew people who's been there who think it's helpful, if they had personal tutors

TABLE K What would stop you from going to the SLU?

Student A	If the classes are after 5pm or if they're too early
Student B	Not being paced in a class where everyone has the same English level, noone being there at the desk when you go in
Student C	Lack of time and feeling different
Student D	Pride
Student E	Nothing

TABLE L How useful is the SLU?

Student A	I think it would be quite helpful for my English and for my work, help me master the language more
Student B	It could be quite useful
Student C	Not useful because I haven't used it
Student D	It's important to have
Student E	Very good if it helps people

Table M How often have you been to the SLU?

Student A	Never
Student B	Twice
Student C	Never
Student D	Never
Student E	Never

Table N Do you remember anyone from the SLU ever coming to lectures or tutorials or orientation?

Student A	No
Student B	Yes
Student C	I can't remember so not a big impact on me
Student D	Not that I remember
Student E	I'm not sure